

CHAPTER SEVEN

SHADES OF EVIL: THE CONSTRUCTION OF WHITE PATRIARCHAL VILLAINY IN THE *STAR WARS* SAGA

SARA MARTIN

Introduction: The Dangerous Double Racialization of the White Man in Black

In Kevin Smith's film *Chasing Amy* (1997), black comic book artist Hooper X berates in a panel session on 'Minority Voices in Comics' the demeaning treatment that black characters receive from his white colleagues. He is soon challenged by two of them sitting in the audience, Holden, the central character, and his buddy and artistic partner, Banky. They contend that, beyond comics, SF and fantasy offer positive role models for African Americans. The ensuing dispute, a typical trademark of Smith's films worth quoting at length, focuses on the *Star Wars* saga:¹

HOLDEN...Lando Calrissian is a positive black role model in the realm of Science Fiction/Fantasy.

HOOPER Fuck Lando Calrissian! Uncle Tom nigger! Always some white boy gotta invoke 'the holy trilogy'! Bust this –those movies are about how the white man keeps the brother man down– even in a galaxy far, far away. Check this shit. You got cracker farm-boy Luke Skywalker, Nazi poster boy -blond hair, blue eyes. And then you've got Darth Vader: the blackest brother in the galaxy. Nubian God.

BANKY What's a Nubian?

HOOPER Shut the fuck up! Now Vader, he's a spiritual brother, with the Force and all that shit. Then this cracker Skywalker gets his hands on a light-sabre, and the boy decides he's gonna run the fucking universe –gets a whole Klan of whites together, and they're gonna bust up Vader's hood, the Death Star. Now what the fuck do you call that!

BANKY Intergalactic Civil War!

HOOPER Gentrification. They're gonna drive over the black element, to make the galaxy quote, unquote 'safe' for white folks.

HOLDEN But Vader turns out to be Luke's father. And in *Jedi*, they become friends.

HOOPER Don't make me bust a cap in your ass, yo! *Jedi's* the most insulting instalment because Vader's beautiful, black visage is sullied when he pulls off his mask to reveal a feeble, crusty white man! They're trying to tell us that deep inside, we all want to be white!

BANKY Well, isn't that true!

At this point, Hooper pulls a gun loaded with blanks and shoots Banky in what turns out to be the wild finale of a stunt he has played in conventions all over America. Once it is over, Hooper clarifies to Holden and Banky – actually his friends – that his publisher insists on this act, as the audience would not buy “the ‘Black Rage’ angle” if they found out that Hooper is gay. In this way the stunt reveals not only obvious racial tensions in George Lucas’s saga (and in America at large) but also other tensions related to the unstable position of gays within the black (fan) community, presumably dominated by heterosexual men.

Leaving this controversial issue aside, my focus here is the contradictory racialization of villain Darth Vader in George Lucas’s popular *Star Wars* saga² as both white *and* black, a point repeated in far less jokey discussions of Lucas’s work at different levels. Peter Marin’s list of “Top Ten African American Sci-fi Characters,” which would certainly have fuelled Hooper’s black rage as they are all by white artists, includes Darth Vader at number ten.³ To be precise, Marin refers to Vader’s voice, that of African American actor James Earl Jones:⁴ “Don't tell me you thought Darth Vader was Caucasian after watching the original film and hearing the immortal baritone of James Earl Jones thunder through time and space! I felt betrayed when Luke pried off his father's helmet in Episode VI to reveal a pasty white face. I don't care what anyone says: Darth Vader was African-American.”⁵ The use of Jones’s racialized voice is highlighted by many other commentators of the saga, usually in the same categorical sense. David Prowse, the tall white actor inside the black cyborg suit, and Sebastian Shaw, to whom the sickly white face belongs, are thus dismissed as irrelevant constituents of Darth Vader’s presentation. Calrissian, by the way, is conspicuously missing from Marin’s list although his introduction as “the duplicitous leader of a sky-based mining operation in Irvin Kershner’s *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) changed the status and place of blackness in American sci-fi cinema.”⁶ Though often dismissed as a “sidekick” or because of his “token position,” Lando’s “role as a successful upwardly mobile black character who has to balance loyalties to

Darth Vader, the thousands of citizens under his governance, and his personal friendship with Han Solo (Harrison Ford), reflect the shifting status of African Americans in the early 1980s.”⁷

Despite this claim, the dual racialization of the villain Vader, the white man in black, has captured the interest of academics working on race issues much above Calrissian or the black Jedi master Mace Windu (Samuel Jackson). As Deis explains, “the black popular imagination, by reinterpreting and reframing meaning and intention, transforms Vader into a type of hero that transcends mere anti-hero status. Although Vader is literally black in color, he becomes a proxy for audiences of color as the ‘strong’ character that leads the Empire in their war against a traditional, white and homogeneous Rebel Alliance.”⁸ A previous commentator also quoted by Deis, Elvis Mitchell, had already praised how “the bullying vigor of James Earl Jones’s vocal presence” gives “a malevolent elegance” to Vader and claimed that “given that Vader was about the coolest thing going in the first *Star Wars*, it made the possibility that he was black perfectly acceptable.”⁹ This ‘cool factor’ no doubt shapes this odd vindication of Vader’s as a figure offering the black imagination what neither Calrissian nor Windu can offer: a fantasy of total empowerment. My worry is that the terms of this vindication are nothing but a complement rather than a reversal of the white patriarchal values espoused by Lucas in the galactic confrontation between the good Jedi and the evil Sith that articulates his saga. Rather than accept the minority status of the black characters in the saga, Deis borrows Leilani Nishime’s concept of the multicultural hybrid mulatto cyborg of the future to present Vader as one, and, as such, “the natural antagonist to the blue eyed, blond hero,” particularly since “in a subtle nod to the taboo of interracial sex, ‘black’ Vader wants to possess the white, fair maiden,”¹⁰ whether this is the Rebel Princess Leia or his mother Padmé Amidala. I find this reading of Vader, often reiterated by other commentators, extremely dangerous for it seems not so much to denounce Lucas’s alleged racism but to celebrate the possibility that a black *man* could turn the tables on white patriarchy and finally do what he is always been feared to do: claim the white woman. What Deis and others are ultimately saying is that, since black men are denied the role of main heroes in the *Star Wars* saga, black audiences (that is, the men in them) find a (suspect) patriarchal comfort in reading the villain as a *cool black anti-hero*, a reading in which, given Vader’s appalling record as a brutal murderer, I, as a *woman*, find much discomfort.

In my view, re-imagining Vader as black, symbolically or literally, is far less productive than exposing him as a *white* patriarchal villain. The academic comment on Vader’s racialization as a black man certainly

illuminates the reception of this aspect of the saga by African American and, perhaps more generally, American audiences. I have, however, difficulties connecting with this view of Vader as, although I have also seen the films in their original version, for me his 'real' voice is that of the excellent Spanish actor that dubbed him, Constantino Romero. In my stubborn stupidity, conditioned by the habit of separating the voices from the bodies on the screen due to the widespread national practice of dubbing films into Spanish, I cannot see how Vader can read as African American because he is voiced by Jones any more than he can be considered Spanish because he is dubbed by Romero. Only audiences watching the films in their original version *and* attuned to the nuances of Jones's accented voice might see Vader as black, if at all, as, anyway, the pale face behind the mask corroborates that he *is* unmistakably white. So do episodes I-III, in which Vader's younger self before his fall to the dark side, Anakin Skywalker, is played by two blond, blue-eyed actors: Jake Lloyd (as a child) and Hayden Christensen (as a teenager and a young man).

I am also baffled by how this obstinate racialization of Vader ignores other more relevant colour codes underlying *Star Wars*. It is not just that "The moral universe of *Star Wars* has two colors: black and white...It's a world with very few shades of gray, much less of brighter, more interesting moral colors."¹¹ Rather, what is missed is how the physical presentation of Vader and, perhaps more obviously of his master Emperor Palpatine (secretly, the Sith Darth Sidious), is conditioned by the codes of European gothic fiction, with its wicked villains –particularly monks–always dressed in black robes. Of course, there is a link in our imaginations between the use of black as a symbol for evil and the evil-doing unfairly attributed to blacks, a point to which I will return later; but the fact is that Vader's *whiteness* should never be ignored, much less muddled up because of his black outfit or African American voice. As a *white* person, I wish to stress the indisputable fact that Anakin/Vader is a patriarchal *white* man who acts with the arrogance and disdain associated with white Euro-American empire-makers in colonial times (and, of course, still today). He personifies a specifically *white* brand of tyranny, and even more so Palpatine. Funnily enough, even though he and Vader are both in episodes IV-VI pasty-faced white men in black clothes, none has vindicated Palpatine as a cool anti-hero secretly representing disempowered African Americans. He is just an abject figure of plain evil and, as a Spaniard sadly familiar with villainous dictators, this is how I wish to read him and Vader: as different versions of the same patriarchal

hunger for power, our enemies both, and by no means heroes, nor even anti-heroes.

The Villain and Critical Whiteness Studies: Problems in the Sociology of White Patriarchal Power

Despite Darth Vader's undeniable interest as a central character in the contemporary American and even global imagination, his case should be seen as just an excuse to make a larger point about whiteness and Critical Whiteness Studies.¹² In my view, this point has to do partly with a still not sufficiently explored conflict regarding the different ways in which whiteness is seen (or not seen) in the United States and in Europe.¹³ Even within Europe, whiteness is far from being a homogenous social category to the point that I myself, European, white skinned, easily sun-burnt but also dark-haired and brown-eyed Mediterranean, might not be seen at all as white in areas of Northern Europe, including Britain, from which most European theories of whiteness originate.¹⁴ To cap this, I live in Barcelona, a city that, for all its cosmopolitanism and growing migrant population from South America, Asia (mainly Pakistan and China), Northern and Central Africa, is still predominantly white by about 90%.¹⁵ I teach in a campus –Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona– in which this racial make-up is perhaps even more unbalanced, as the children of this still recent migratory wave have not yet reached higher education and foreign non-white students are a tiny minority. My position is not at all that of American researchers writing on race, and is not even similar to that of my British peers in their 21st-century multicultural United Kingdom.

This may have some advantages as I find that American scholarship on whiteness tends to deal actually with race more generically, keeping a somewhat blurred focus on whiteness itself, as if the elusiveness of this ideology, underscored by the specialists, was indeed overpowering. Perhaps –just perhaps– a predominantly white environment provides a more focused background, as it is isolated from the controversy surrounding Critical Whiteness Studies within the USA. As it is well known, this discipline started there in the 1990s inspired by Critical Race Theory, itself a late 1970s subsidiary of early 1970s Critical Legal Studies, born in their turn out of the Civil Rights movement. The pioneering work by bell hooks, *Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination* (1970), was a very early forerunner of later 1990s seminal work: David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991), Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Ruth Frankenberg's *White*

Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness (1993), and Theodore Allen's *The Invention of the White Race* (vol. 1, 1994, vol. 2 1997). In Britain, Richard Dyer's *White* (1997) set new standards for the study of the representation of whiteness, slightly different from the mainly sociological and historical American approach. The problem regarding whiteness all these authors highlighted is that

In contrast to those whose identity is defined by their classificatory status as members of a given group, whites are perceived as individual historical agents whose unclassifiable difference from one another is their most prominent trait. Whiteness itself is thus atomized into invisibility through the individualization of white subjects.¹⁶

The practice of Critical Whiteness Studies entails, thus, not just the 'outing' of white individuals as essential elements of the ideology of whiteness –my own aim here as regards Vader– but also the examination of the role of *all* whites in the institutionalization of colonial conquest, slavery and slave work, the blood-related legal definitions of citizenship, and, above all, white privilege. The ultimate point of this discipline would be, in its extremest formulation, the 'abolition' of the white race, as called for by the editors of the journal *Race Traitor*, John Garvey and Noel Ignatiev.

Although they actually wanted to encourage white people to respond "to every manifestation of white supremacy as if it were directed against them,"¹⁷ which seems a commendable enough strategy to end intolerance, the terms 'abolition' and 'race traitor' have generated much debate and even a downright rejection of Critical Whiteness Studies: "David Horowitz, a conservative social critic who is white, said whiteness studies is leftist philosophy spiraling out of control. 'Black studies celebrates blackness, Chicano studies celebrates Chicanos, women's studies celebrates women, and white studies attacks white people as evil,' Horowitz said."¹⁸ This is an important point. It may be true in a way that "WS teaches that if you are white, you are branded, literally in the flesh, with evidence of a kind of original sin. You can try to mitigate your evilness, but you can't eradicate it."¹⁹ Yet, the point is that evil must be acknowledged and, somehow, atoned for. Not just the appalling evil that permitted the discourse of revolutionary freedom to coexist with slavery in America in the past, but also the white evil glamourized today in the white imagination that generates villains like Vader, even where it should be most persistently challenged. Bringing to light critically "the stubborn persistence of whiteness as a cultural norm in many of the postcolonial world's official and unofficial cultural practices,"²⁰ Alfred J. López argues

tellingly that "One does not make whiteness as a malignant colonial ideology go away simply by showing how it deconstructs itself, any more than one can do away with the concept of the subject by such maneuverings."²¹ Following Dyer, López calls attention to the "distancing mechanism" by which whites separate themselves from "extreme" whiteness, for instance in "self-congratulatory films such as *Schindler's List* in which we see a noble white man combat the evils of 'extreme' whiteness. Thus, everyday whiteness can distance itself from its most virulent manifestations *while maintaining its cultural privileges*."²² In my view, *Star Wars*, like most epic narratives written by whites, also uses this distancing mechanism and thus contributes to maintaining white privilege. This is done, first, by transforming white Darth Vader from villain to anti-hero in the second trilogy (episodes I-III) so that he gains our sympathies and, second, by having him eliminate Darth Sidious, the saga's 'insidious' example of 'extreme' whiteness. Significantly, Lucas avoids examining at all how this extremely powerful, evil white monster stands for a rampant ideology of white privilege, to celebrate instead Vader's redemption and the ascent of his not less white son, Luke, to the status of hero.

To what extent can this 'distance mechanism' be defused? Why is it so hard, in short, to see white baddies as representatives of the white ideology of power? Why do we even celebrate them as racialized figures of (alternative) empowerment? I believe the answer to all this lies entangled in the confusion which has to do with the overlapping of bodies and ideologies. For, what is whiteness, after all?

I believe it is best understood as an ideologically supported social positionality that has accrued to people of European descent as a consequence of the economic and political advantage gained during and subsequent to European colonial expansion. The position was originally facilitated by the construction of 'race,' which acted as a marker of entitlement to this position. The phenotypes, especially skin color, around which the notion of 'race' was organized, acted as a useful means of naturalizing what in fact were political and economic relationships, supporting the fiction that the inequalities structured into the relationships were the result of endogenous, probably genetic, inequalities between 'races.' Whiteness is the shared social space in which the psychological, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of this privileged positionality are normalized, and rendered unremarkable.²³

To those of us in Gender Studies, particularly in Masculinity Studies, the problem of 'normalized privilege' sounds familiar enough: should we distinguish between patriarchy, the ideology based on hegemonic masculinism and the real enemy of equality, and men, the persons who

have, arguably, most benefitted up till now from patriarchy? Or are all men complicit in patriarchy, regardless of their degree of power within it? In the same way, are all white persons complicit with whiteness, regardless of actual privilege? What is actually a white person?

White women find it particularly difficult to answer these queries, as we have to acknowledge our own race-based privilege while denouncing our obvious patriarchal subordination. We may be closer to disempowered Amidala, the hard-working politician that Anakin Skywalker secretly marries and downgrades to the status of harassed wife, than to empowered Vader. Still, we have to acknowledge, as Peggy McIntosh does, that "Since I have had trouble facing white privilege, and describing its results in my life, I saw parallels here with men's reluctance to acknowledge male privilege."²⁴ While some call for the theorization of white womanhood "as an institution in the service of white control and supremacy in the same way that heterosexuality has been used as an institution in the service of patriarchy,"²⁵ others blame mainly men for the evils of whiteness:

Given the gender constructs in white Anglo-American cultures from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, it was white males who engineered colonialism, imperialism and slavery. This is not to deny white women's complicity and involvement: I intend merely to note that the power (complicit with male investment in technologies and instrumental knowledges) to create these historical institutions has been in white male hands.²⁶

For me, this is too easy a position. As a *white* woman, I need to acknowledge how my race privileges me but also how it makes me complicit with white racism (it does). As a *feminist, anti-patriarchal* woman, I need to expose the complicity of women of all races with patriarchal men of all races (sad but true); also, and foremost, I must stress that patriarchy is a more encompassing ideology than whiteness. The evidence, for instance, of the non-white patriarchal, militaristic Japanese imperialism that ended in WWII suggests to me that eliminating whiteness, sadly, does not guarantee the end of patriarchal domination. I do want to contribute to eliminating both, but my criticism of both Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies is that they might in the end prevent us from dealing with the patriarchal evil caused by patriarchal non-whites, which cannot be denied to exist and even to be rampant, no matter how politically incorrect this may sound. I am ready to acknowledge that patriarchal whites (mainly men, but also women) have done most evil in the history of the world but not *all* whites, for many have been or are honourable race traitors. I am not willing to accept, in any

case, that the world would be free from evil if whiteness were 'abolished,' as patriarchy would anyway still prevail. This is the real heart of darkness. In the end, as a woman, my main worry is not the color of the men that might dominate women now or in the future, but how to end patriarchal men's dominion, beginning with that of whites, as history calls now for that. Hence, my outing of Anakin/Vader as a monstrous (white) villain.

The Representation of White Villainy and the Problem of Individualization: Rejecting Redemption

I do not know whether whites are the only race to represent some of their members as villains; I assume this is not the case at all. Certainly, racialized villains created by whites, such as Sax Rohmer's notorious Fu Manchu, have been heavily criticized as blatant examples of racism, yet most villains are white, a fact which generates no comment. This is odd, to say the least, perhaps even suspect. I am personally still puzzling over why, given the chance to criticize Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe chose to censure Conrad for his (alleged) racist misrepresentation of black Africans²⁷ instead of taking up the chance to present white Kurtz not just as an individual case of colonial corruption but as the embodiment of whiteness in its worst ideological excesses. If you, as a woman, want to undermine patriarchy, the more effective strategy will be exposing the villain Bluebeard as the incarnation of widespread patriarchal misogyny, an extreme version of a rule rather than its particularized exception; complaining about the misrepresentation of his women will only lead to a dead end and divert attention from the real evil.

A villain is a fictional character who embodies evil and whose psychology is limited to the relentless pursuit of power through the performance, precisely, of selfish evil acts that harm others. Actors love playing villains for the same reason that audiences love them: because they misbehave thoroughly, as we are not allowed to do. Palpatine/Sidious is, according to the actor who plays him, Scots-born Ian McDiarmid, "worse than the Devil" yet "fun, you're not going to get a part like that every day. I like the fact that he doesn't really have any psychological workings. He was spawned in Hell in a way, as Siths are apparently."²⁸ As a good Scots, McDiarmid rejoices in the Jekyll-and-Hyde quality in Palpatine, since in his role as Senator, later Chancellor, he is a "straightforward politician –charming, smiling, out for the good of the universe. But underneath that there lurks a monster. So it was very easy to build the character -I just looked in the newspapers."²⁹ Evidence of white

villainy is, indeed, staring us in the face daily, yet it is concealed, like Palpatine's real nature as Sidious, by our attributing to the villain an exceptional nature outside the norm rather than see him as an integral part of it.

It is not by chance that Mc Diarmid links Palpatine to the Devil and Hell, for Christian morality shapes the villain, arguably a secular version of Satan. Christianity is also a source of confusion as regards its color-coded symbolism and the issue of race. Drawing on the pioneering work of Winthrop Jordan, Jones argues that "the European association of black with darkness and evil long precedes any application to black Africans."³⁰ He adds that research by historians and anthropologists shows how night and day are the basis for the development of a universal symbology for frightful darkness and comforting light. Jordan, however, and others, pointed out that due to the "the perception of black Africans as extremely primitive, the term 'black' begins to be associated with civilizational backwardness in a way that it never was in the premodern world."³¹ This heart of darkness was, in Toni Morrison's view, transformed because of slavery into –using Lucas's title for episode I– a phantom menace for the white imagination: "Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence –one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness. And it shows."³² Nama, already quoted in relation to Lando Calrissian, speaks, precisely, of James Earl Jones's black voicing of Darth Vader as a renewal of the "early American sci-fi film tradition of black structured absence," though he acknowledges that the saga's "Manichean façade" cannot be explained away solely on this basis.³³

Richard Dyer himself is also perplexed by the embedding of this black and white racist moral vocabulary in American film:

Any simple mapping of hue, skin and symbol onto one another is clearly not accurate. White people are far from being always represented as good, for instance. Yet I am now persuaded that the slippage between the three is more pervasive than I thought at first, to the extent that it does probably underlie all representation of white people. For a white person who is bad is failing to be 'white,' whereas a black person who is good is a surprise, and one who is bad merely fulfils expectations.³⁴

This would agree with the racialized perception that when the good white Jedi Anakin Skywalker accepts evil Emperor Palpatine's offer to embrace the dark side and become his henchman, he is punished by becoming a black man, at least symbolically, as signalled by his black cyborg suit. I

want to resist this reading, however, because it shifts the burden of the patriarchal discourse of the films onto collateral non-white racial issues, which are not at its core. Also, because this (mis)reading contributes to further erasing the fact that both Vader and Palpatine *are* white. I am more interested in the brand of gothic horror they represent, a horror shaped not so much by the absence of the Other as by the very palpable presence of *white* guilt. Leslie Fiedler was the first to observe this in relation to the white American imagination:

Moreover, in the United States, certain special guilts awaited projection in the gothic form. A dream of innocence had sent Europeans across the ocean to build a new society immune to the compounded evil of the past from which no one in Europe could ever feel himself free. But the slaughter of the Indians, who would not yield their lands to the carriers of utopia, and the abominations of the slave trade, in which the black man, rum, and money were inextricably entwined in a knot of guilt, provided new evidence that evil did not remain with the world that had been left behind.³⁵

This persistent evil surfaces again and again in American stories that try essentially to exonerate white Americans from guilt. In Lucas's episodes IV–VI, released between 1977 and 1983, the discourse is transparent: Emperor Palpatine is the embodiment of this root evil that will not let go of white America, Darth Vader his willing servant, and Rebel Luke the all American hero. Something, however, kept nagging Lucas: the problem of how Vader fell to the dark side, that is, the problem of white American innocence turned evil. In the second trilogy (episodes I–III, released 1999–2005), which, essentially, narrates Anakin's willing transformation into Palpatine's henchman, Lucas examines Vader's fall in order to exonerate him, turning him into Palpatine's *victim*. If we want to attach importance to voices, then Palpatine/Sidious' European, British voice speaks volumes about the origin of evil on American soil. The split of the white villain in two, although unnecessary in strict narrative terms –Darth Vader is a potent enough symbol of the Empire's evil colonial ways– is thus made necessary by the internal American logic of this renewed myth of redeemed whiteness.

Much has been written about Lucas's taking inspiration from Joseph Campbell's famous essay on ancient myth *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell himself, though, best explains how the saga deals with very modern patriarchal fears: "Darth Vader has not developed his own humanity. He's a robot. He's a bureaucrat, living not in terms of himself but of an imposed system. This is the threat to our lives that we all

face today.”³⁶ Concurring with this view, Rushing and Frentz use their own American mythical scheme –based on a triple articulation: Indian hunter, frontier hunter, technological hunter– to explain Anakin’s downfall: “Darth Vader is the dark shadow cast by the hunter hero’s pride in his relentless quest for power.”³⁷ Indeed, the words ‘pride’ and ‘power’ characterize Anakin’s behavior based, basically, on the premise that his pride makes him feel (wrongly) entitled to accumulating power. His fall and imprisonment in the cyborg suit is thus both a cautionary tale for all men (do not demand more than your share of power) and also a criticism of, as Campbell points out, the tyrannical domination of the individual man by the hierarchical, dehumanizing, patriarchal system.

Of course, Anakin’s Faustian bargain with Palpatine has much to do with his wish to compensate for his origins, as he is born a slave. Surprisingly, I have not come across any criticism of this appropriation of the discourse of slavery by white America, even though it is easy to racialize Anakin’s fall attributing it to the smug ingratitude of the liberated slave, or to his being raised by an unmarried slave mother. Gwendolyn Foster reminds us that “As a general rule, bad-white men are born bad or reared badly. Thus male white badness is clearly connected to inadequate white motherhood.”³⁸ Anakin’s mother, Schmi, cannot be said to be a bad mother at all, to the extent that she accepts surrendering her young boy and only comfort, aged 9, to the Jedi as an apprentice when knights Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi claim him. Yet, she is certainly an emotional burden in the life of her son, unlike his unknown father. Apparently, Schmi was miraculously impregnated by the midi-chlorians in her body (elements of the mystic Force present in all cells), though Palpatine himself much later hints that he himself manipulated the mysterious midi-chlorians to beget Anakin. There is, however, no clear revelation of parentage, unlike what happens between Darth Vader and his son by Amidala, Luke. This messy, silly, aspect of the plot is part of Lucas’s general inability to deal with sex. It can be read in a misogynistic way (Schmi is to blame for giving birth to a monster, or, alternatively, she is just a vessel for male reproduction), or, as I prefer, as a sign of the elitist eugenics underlying the saga. Like Perlich, I believe that “Lucas trips on his own shoelaces upon the intersection of two themes –the metaphysical prospect and genetics.”³⁹ As Kapell observes, the powers of both heroes and villains in the saga “are rooted in their own elite biology,” and while Harry Potter fights Lord Voldemort’s obsession for blood purity, Anakin is praised for the matchless high count of midi-chlorians in his blood.⁴⁰ Make no mistake: for all the racial, ethnic and species diversity of the Jedi,

their poster boys are a white guy with genetically endowed superior blood and his son.

Being the chosen one, however, is not easy, as Anakin discovers, for patriarchy is crowded at the top, both on the Jedi and the Sith sides. The sweet slave child soon turns, under Qui-Gon's and above all Obi-Wan's mentorship, into a surly teenager and an even surlier young man. The problem has to do with the contradictory nature of white patriarchal, capitalist America, of which the Jedi are the mystic front, as it encourages male individualism and exceptionality while requiring mutual male involvement for its reproduction. Anakin has been told that he is unique and deprived of his mother for that. He has been invited, instead, to join what is, essentially, a brotherhood of celibate males quite inept at personal emotion (Lucas might disagree, of course). Confronted with the mass of grievances that Anakin feels as an ex-slave too impatient to wield his promised share of power, Obi-Wan "bumbles" his mentorship "and perpetually squabbles with him."⁴¹ In no time, Anakin's "smarmy resistance to Obi-Wan's teachings turns his otherwise patient and kin master into a hectoring nag,"⁴² which only aggravates their failing communication. Intriguingly, Campbell's essay on the hero already contained the explanation for why Anakin's initiation fails so dramatically:

The mystagogue (father or father-substitute) is to entrust the symbols of office only to a son who has been effectually purged of all inappropriate infantile cathexes—for whom the just, impersonal exercise of the powers will not be rendered impossible by unconscious (or perhaps even conscious and rationalized) motives of self-aggrandisement, personal preference, or resentment. Ideally, the invested one has been divested of his mere humanity and is representative of an impersonal cosmic force. He is the twice-born: he has become himself the father.⁴³

Here's the problem: Anakin is too human, too vulnerable for the demands of hierarchical Jedi life. And the Jedi too inhuman and, to boot, very bad at psychology. For all their Force-based intuition, they cannot grasp a very basic concept: if you promise a man power, you have to fulfil that promise or else face the consequences of his rage. This rage, of course, will take epic dimensions if the man promised supreme power has in him the will to claim it at all costs and the midi-chlorians to back up this will.

Logically, there is much controversy as to whether Anakin is ultimately responsible for his acts, as it is quite clear that Lucas will not, or cannot, criticize the idealized Jedi. Are his moral flaws the product of bad Jedi training, or is he already flawed, hence untrainable and vulnerable to Palpatine's shady seduction? Commentators are split on this issue. Lyden

assumes that Anakin was found too late for its potential to be properly channelled and so "he becomes wilful, disobedient and disdainful towards those with less power, such as the members of the Jedi council. It is hard to see how he could have been different."⁴⁴ In a similar pessimistic vein, Brown asserts that Vader may finally kill the Emperor but "there will always be plenty of Anakin Skywalkers in the world –persons of great talent and potential who could, at any moment, fall from grace and give in to the Dark Side's temptation to believe that power is more important than moral purity."⁴⁵ Among those who wonder why Anakin's acts are condoned by the audience and the rhetoric of his moral salvation by his son Luke accepted, Atkinson and Calafell worry that this is due to the fact that the gray area that allows for the avoidance of moral responsibility is "an important component to hegemonic masculinity prevalent in contemporary culture."⁴⁶ They blame Anakin's ambiguous status as privileged but underprivileged (as an ex-slave) for this tepid audience response to his crimes and note, although ignoring whiteness, that the split between Anakin and Vader helps exonerate him.

Ryan and Kellner contend that the *Star Wars* saga shows how the "process of patriarchal reproduction rests on an irreducible anxiety. That anxiety is the result of a fear of feminine sexuality and of the threat to male sexual identity it represents."⁴⁷ Since this sexuality is represented by white women –Schmi, Anakin's wife Amidala, and their daughter Princess Leia– much has been made of the link between gender and race in the anomaly, the threat, that Anakin/Vader poses. Interestingly, in this sexualization of the villain, male whiteness is not foregrounded; puzzlingly, it is even coded as black or, gallingly, effeminate and gay.

In an example of this muddled reading, Gabriel S. Estrada sees Amidala as "the good white woman who must die rather than succumb to Anakin's 'dark' sexual libido with its racist overtones,"⁴⁸ to the point that he reads Obi-Wan as a defender of her white purity against Anakin, her black rapist. This is, to say the least, confusing, as the three characters are white and Amidala is never sexually assaulted by Anakin. In punishment for his aggression (he does try to strangle Amidala believing himself betrayed by her when he decides to side with Palpatine and she rejects him), Anakin, as we know, is "literally transplanted into a black cyborg body making his transformation into a 'dark' man complete."⁴⁹ In case we had not noted, Darth Vader's "shiny black leather outfit, mouth grill and large phallic hood embody Lucas's obsession for the fetishisation of the black phallus."⁵⁰ The villain thus becomes a gigantic black dildo, compensating for his inability to sexually possess his white wife and mother. Furthermore, Estrada argues, the hero Luke's horror when discovering

that he is Vader's son is not based on his father's being evil but on his own blood being tainted. This taint springs from Lucas's horror of mestizo miscegenation, as seen in Estrada's assumption that "Vader's evil tendencies spring from a genetic mixing of his dark Sith father and his white slave mother."⁵¹ Her kidnapping, torture and death by the nomadic Sand People –according to Estrada, a negative version of tribal non-white life– thus precipitates the burst of uncontrollable rage that leads Anakin to commit his first horrific crime: the massacre of the whole tribe. "Her death," Estrada explains, "prevents the horror of white-Indian and hence eventual *coyote*-type miscegenation as a result of either rape or adoption as a wife and mother by tribal members."⁵² Anakin, in short, appears to have a dark father (even though Palpatine, the alleged 'father,' is white), is therefore himself Luke's mestizo father, and also appears to be the prospective black rapist of wife and mother (Estrada forgets the daughter), while at the same time being mortally afraid of having mestizo siblings. To add even more confusion, Estrada claims that when Luke loses an arm in combat with Vader, he "takes on the phallic sword symbol of the Asian male warrior," losing "his virility and sexual desire." Thus, "Luke's castration by Darth Vader is, on one level, a castration of Asian masculinity."⁵³ How this helps to challenge the pernicious effects of *whiteness* is quite unclear as whiteness is ultimately made invisible by heaping upon it all these other colors, which whites do not perceive as central to the story. Estrada and others claim, of course, that this is precisely the point, their absence, but miss in the process the chance of critically analyzing what is *present*, that is, whiteness.

Equally worrying from an anti-homophobic, feminist point of view is the characterization of the relationship between Anakin/Vader and his master as disturbingly homoerotic, for it is hard to say where Lucas's homophobia and misogyny end and where that of the commentators begins. I would agree that Lucas has serious difficulties in dealing with sexual issues: he is as incapable of showing homosexual or heterosexual desire (much less love) convincingly. His saga is also quite muddled when it comes to the classic oedipal scenario, as the hero Luke almost falls in love with his twin sister Leia and she herself is tortured by her father as Vader (he doesn't know who she is, so much for *male* Jedi intuition). Estrada, though, writes that Palpatine "prefers to operate behind the vaginal folds of his hood, behind the light sabers of other men who defend him as if he was a damsel in distress."⁵⁴ Those who, unlike Estrada, do not comment on race issues seem also obsessed by the castration anxiety which drenches the saga.⁵⁵ The Emperor's fondling of Luke's light sabre as he tempts him to replace his father leaves no room for doubt as to the

real core of the saga: "As a servant of the Emperor, Vader is finally perceived as a feminized father, and Luke fears he will become just like him."⁵⁶ Ironically, "The ultimate '*femme fatale*' of the saga actually is not Padmé Amidala but Palpatine, and his illicit 'marriage' to Anakin/Vader long outlasts the hero's union with Padmé," for twenty years.⁵⁷ It is important to remember that what is wrong in presenting Darth Sidious as the quintessential "queeny villain" is "the gross imbalance caused by the fact that the heroes in Hollywood films are to this day almost *never* shown to be openly gay, even in *Star Wars*."⁵⁸ Again, by describing Palpatine as grossly gay in the worst misogynistic, homophobic terms nothing is gained regarding the unmasking of *whiteness*, and only too little in the way of exposing patriarchy, except that its prejudices spread all over academic analysis.

Where, in the end, do we find the essence of the whiteness embodied by these two black-clad bad white men, Vader and Palpatine? No doubt, in the discourse on white patriarchal power. *Star Wars*, like all patriarchal stories involving heroes and villains, is a fantasy about finding the good patriarch. Despite the politically correct decision to introduce more variety in the species and racial make-up of the saga, this is at heart the story of three white men trying to balance not so much the legendary universal Force but the patriarchal government of the galaxy. Lucas himself declared in an interview in which he criticized the media's undermining of the American presidency that "there's probably no better form of government than a good despot."⁵⁹ Palpatine's violent transformation of the federal interplanetary Republic represented, among others, by Senator Amidala, into "the monster that is the Galactic Empire" proves that he cannot be that good despot, for "He is all ego with no spirit, locked within a fortress of hate and aggression. Looking much like the Grim Reaper, the very embodiment of death, he transforms the world around him into a wasteland that is in danger of becoming one giant machine."⁶⁰ Episodes I-III thus read as a warning against the accumulation of too much power in the same hands.⁶¹ Yet, the saga seems to bemoan at heart that Anakin can never fulfil his potential. This is why Vader inspires admiration, as actor Hayden Christensen noted when first donning the famous suit:

That was what was thrilling: watching everyone take Vader in for the first time. People that I'd spent a lot of time with, who knew I was in the costume, would see him and while there was an excitement and a certain awe, there was a fear and a respect. As I walked by, their eyes would light up and then they would lower their heads a bit and take a couple of steps back. That was a very empowering feeling.⁶²

In Lucas's discourse, Anakin fails to become the good white despot because his sexual desire for Queen, later Senator, Amidala prevents him from turning his potential power to good ends. This is the crucial point at which whiteness and patriarchy meet. The feminist commentators on the saga, both men and women, have quickly seen that although publicly and politically empowered, both Amidala and her daughter Leia "must suffer sexual abjection to an extent that subverts whatever power they otherwise manifest."⁶³ Commentators agree that Leia, created in the late 1970s, is much less disempowered (though more sexualized) than her mother, created in the late 1990s. Whereas intrepid Leia falls for the intrepid Han Solo in a battle of the sexes laced with the fast-paced repartee of old Hollywood comedy, the love story between Anakin and Amidala is simply horrific, as it is based on a sick mutual dependence, kept secret by his Jedi vows of celibacy, which leads to her death. Film director Kevin Smith, the well-known saga fan, reads teenage Anakin's dogged pursuit of the older Amidala as typical of American life, in which so many high-school "hot chicks" go for "the massive fuck-ups,"⁶⁴ without either understanding why. Anakin's love is, no doubt, sexual passion based not only on Amidala's sheer beauty but also on her status as a politician: the little slave that meets the Queen in her plain, clandestine disguise fulfils his dream of possessing her and, what is more, manages to make her deeply dependent on him: "Indeed, the more violently possessive and somewhat deranged Anakin behaves, the more Padmé is attracted to him, until the audience is left wondering half-seriously whether she has unknowingly fallen prey to some sort of psychic suggestion or Force persuasion on Skywalker's part."⁶⁵ The dependence, however, is mutual and, as such, cleverly exploited by Palpatine. He tempts Anakin onto the dark side by persuading him that as a Sith master he can teach Anakin to prevent what he most fears in his recurring nightmares: the death of his wife. With this strategy, Sidious prepares the ground for what he knows is inevitable: the point at which Amidala, for all her generous love of Anakin, will have to reject him for defecting to the dark side using her as an excuse. This is Palpatine's gambit and it works.

Although Lucas was probably not concerned with this at all, others have found that

Read through that lens [her dependence on Anakin], Padmé's character is disturbingly symbolic of the rising statistics of domestic and relationship abuse among young women in this country...It specially concerned me to read several posts on two of the more popular *Star Wars* fan forums from fans that identified themselves as teenagers (under eighteen) or young

adults (under twenty-five) that saw the ending as highly romantic because it showed just how deeply Padmé loved Anakin.⁶⁶

This 'romantic' ending narrates Amidala's death of a broken heart right after childbirth. As Palpatine presumed, a horrified Amidala rejects Anakin's offer to share power with him at the Emperor's service and then "Like many an abusive husband, in an all-too-ordinary outburst of domestic violence, Anakin turns on his pregnant wife, the one he had vowed to protect and save at all costs, and strangles her. Only the more attractive prospect of destroying Kenobi distracts him from murdering Padmé in his irrational fury."⁶⁷ Anakin fights then his former master, who, standing on a literal and moral high ground, wins, amputating in the course of the fierce combat most of Anakin's limbs, leaving him to burn on the hot lava of their battlefield, a symbolic hell from where satanic Palpatine 'rescues' him only to press him into his service as the re-named Sith, Darth Vader.

What is particularly white, then, in this tragedy? Can we possibly imagine a racially mixed set of characters (Anakin, Amidala, Obi-Wan, Palpatine) with similar results? Or an all-black or all-Asian cast? The answer depends on whether we read the crucial issues in the saga –the (Sith) quest for power, the (Jedi) sexual hypocrisy and emotional shortcomings– as uniquely white or as typically patriarchal across all the races. As the four characters mentioned here are white, their confrontation must be seen as part of (American) whiteness. Amidala's death is not a new version of the suicide of the white maiden in the face of the black rapist; it is rather the result of the perverted codes of white chivalry by which those to be protected by loving white knights end up destroyed by them for not accepting their thorough submission. Palpatine knows this and plays his card for his benefit, achieving Anakin's thorough submission as the black knight Vader until Vader's son –not daughter– rescues him. If blacks see something to identify with in Vader, this may have to do with this patriarchal dynamics of legitimating bad male power as good power but not with the colour of Vader's cyborg suit. Palpatine and Obi-Wan represent, precisely, these two sides of power: the one that is excessive and must be, therefore, limited for the Force (patriarchy, of course) to stay balanced and the one that, although ready to privilege others as Jedis, is not ready to abolish Jedi privilege, masked as duty, for good.

And this is a thoroughly white, male rhetoric: the democracy espoused by the Rebels of Leia and Luke's generation and by the increasingly mixed cast of the trilogies is brought about at the cost of exonerating all-white Anakin from guilt. Perhaps it is important to conclude by stressing that although any member of the many anthropomorphic species populating the

saga could have been locked in Vader's suit, Lucas chose to enclose a *white man* in order to elicit the pity of his mostly white audience. So potent was this pity that he wrote episodes I-III to explain how this white man became a monster (out of love for his woman...), not at all to criticize him but to make him even more pitiful. When we hear handsome but dreadfully disfigured, young Anakin yell 'No!' as he is placed inside the prison-suit he will wear for 20 years, we are horrified by his ordeal much more than by his appalling crimes, even though these include massacring children and killing his own pregnant wife. This is white patriarchal rhetoric: pity the manly anti-heroic villain, for he is not responsible for his crimes; hate as irrationally as you can old, hideous, effeminate, satanic Darth Sidious but do nothing to understand him or to prevent another one like him from rising. See, in short, these white patriarchal men as individuals in this potent galactic morality play and forget that their *class* dominates not just Lucas's saga but most of the white imagination that, in its turn, dominates most of our globalized world. At your own risk.

Notes

¹ My thanks to my partner, Gonzalo García del Río, for bringing this scene to my attention.

² I refer here to the six films known as the two trilogies, not to the complementary narratives of the so-called 'expanded universe,' which includes comics, TV cartoon series, novels, computer games and fan fiction, both written and filmed. The six movies are: *Star Wars: Episode IV-A New Hope* (1977), *Star Wars: Episode V-The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *Star Wars: Episode VI-The Return of the Jedi* (1983), *Star Wars: Episode I-The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Star Wars: Episode II-Attack of the Clones* (2002) and *Star Wars: Episode III-The Revenge of the Sith* (2005).

³ Marin, website. The list includes, apart from Vader: 1. Laurence Fishburne as Morpheus in *The Matrix*, 2. Tina Turner as Auntie Entity in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, 3. Joe Morton as The Brother in *The Brother From Another Planet*, Will Smith as Steven Hiller in *Independence Day*, 5. Nichelle Nichols as Lt. Uhura in *Star Trek*, 6. Wesley Snipes as Simon Phoenix in *Demolition Man*, 7. Yaphet Kotto as Parker in *Alien*, 8. Isaac Hayes as The Duke in *Escape From New York* and Keith David as Childs in *The Thing*, and 9. Halle Berry as Storm in *X2: X-Men United*.

⁴ For a complete list of the actors who have played and/or voiced Darth Vader or Anakin Skywalker, see <http://www.imdb.com/character/ch00000005/> (accessed August 2010).

⁵ Marin, *ibid*.

⁶ Nama, "R Is for Race, Not Rocket: Black Representation in American Science Fiction Cinema," 159.

⁷ Ibid., 160.

⁸ Deis, "May the Force (Not) Be with You: 'Race Critical' Readings and the *Star Wars* Universe," 93.

⁹ Mitchell, "Works Every Time," 78.

¹⁰ Deis, *ibid.*

¹¹ Dees, "Moral Ambiguity in a Black-and-White Universe," 39.

¹² See the website *Whiteness Studies: Deconstructing (the) Race*, <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/index.html> (accessed August 2010) for an up-to-date view of the field.

¹³ This is a point first made by Bonnett, *White Identities: Historical and International Perspectives*.

¹⁴ See Fra-Molinero, on "The Suspect Whiteness of Spain."

¹⁵ The percentage is approximate as statistics for Barcelona refer to 'foreign' population by nationality, not race, which is not a category contemplated in the city's census.

¹⁶ Chambers, "The Unexamined," 192.

¹⁷ Garvey and Ignatiev, "Toward a New Abolitionism: A *Race Traitor* Manifesto," 349.

¹⁸ Fears, "Hue and Cry on 'Whiteness Studies,'" webpage.

¹⁹ Kay, "Blaming Whitey," webpage.

²⁰ López, "Introduction: Whiteness after Empire," 4.

²¹ Ibid., 13. His other complaint, that little had been done to explore "how the representational power of whiteness has historically operated in the service of colonial and neocolonial regimes in the domination of their nonwhite others" (*ibid.*, 4), is currently being addressed. See for instance, Boucher, Carey and Ellinghaus, *Re-orienting Whiteness*.

²² Ibid., 23, original emphasis.

²³ Steyn, "'White Talk': White South Africans and the Management of Diasporic Whiteness," 121.

²⁴ McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies," 291.

²⁵ Davy, "Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/Lesbian Project," 213.

²⁶ Kaplan, "The 'Look' Returned: Knowledge Production and Constructions of 'Whiteness' in Humanities Scholarship and Independent Film," 324.

²⁷ Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," 1-13.

²⁸ Brett, "Ian McDiarmid -*Star Wars: Episode III*," webpage.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jones, "Darkness Made Visible: Law, Metaphor and the Racial Self," 60.

³¹ Ibid., 61.

³² Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 6.

³³ Nama, *ibid.*, 159.

³⁴ Dyer, *White*, 63.

³⁵ Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 143.

³⁶ Campbell with Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, 178.

³⁷ Rushing and Frenztz, *Projecting the Shadow: The Cyborg Hero in American Film*, 3.

- ³⁸ Foster, *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/constructions in the Cinema*, 117.
- ³⁹ Perlich, "'I've got a bad feeling about this:' Lucas Gets Lost on the Path of Mythos," 22.
- ⁴⁰ Kapell, "Eugenics, Racism, and the Jedi Gene Pool," 160.
- ⁴¹ Lawrence, "Joseph Campbell, George Lucas, and the Monomyth," 27.
- ⁴² Dees, *ibid.*, 48.
- ⁴³ Campbell, *The Myth of the Hero*, 136.
- ⁴⁴ Lyden, "Apocalyptic Determinism and *Star Wars*," 50.
- ⁴⁵ Brown, "'A Wretched Hive of Scum and Villainy:' *Star Wars* and the Problem of Evil," 79.
- ⁴⁶ Atkinson and Calafell, "'Darth Vader Made Me Do It!' Anakin Skywalker's Avoidance of Responsibility and the Gray Areas of Hegemonic Masculinity in the *Star Wars* Universe," 4.
- ⁴⁷ Ryan and Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, 233.
- ⁴⁸ Estrada, "Star Wars Episodes I-VI: Coyote and the Force of White Narrative," 70.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 79, original emphasis.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 81.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ⁵⁵ Gordon, "The Power of the Force: Sex in the *Star Wars* Trilogy," 202.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.
- ⁵⁷ Wilson, "Seduced by the Dark Side of the Force: Gender, Sexuality, and Moral Agency in George Lucas's *Star Wars* Universe," 150.
- ⁵⁸ Kaufman, "How the *Star Wars* Saga Evokes the Creative Promise of Homosexual Love: A Gay-Centered Psychological Perspective," 146.
- ⁵⁹ Schell, "I'm a Cynic Who has Hope for the Human Race," website.
- ⁶⁰ Henderson, *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*, 101.
- ⁶¹ See McVeigh, "The Galactic Way of Warfare," 35-58.
- ⁶² Brett, "Hayden Christensen -*Star Wars: Episode III*," webpage.
- ⁶³ Simpson, "Thawing the Ice Princess," 116.
- ⁶⁴ Smith, "Rebel Without a Cause: Darth Vader's Low Self-Esteem Problem," 29.
- ⁶⁵ Wilson, *ibid.*, 138.
- ⁶⁶ Dominguez, "Feminism and the Force: Empowerment and Disillusionment in a Galaxy Far, Far Away," 125.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

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